

A. Hurley: Beyond preservation: using public history to revitalize inner cities

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In the last few decades there has been a remarkable revival of cities as the focal points of economic and cultural life. Many cities that seemed to be dying in the 1970s turned out to be focal points of economic and cultural life four decades later. One aspect of this remarkable turn of events has been the increasing appreciation of cities as meaningful places. The identity of cities has been determined in the course of history and the remnants of the past are therefore often cherished. It is not just that these old buildings and other objects are preserved, or restored in their former state, but often they receive a place in today's society. The past is made useful for the present by integrating cultural heritage in our present-day society.

Andrew Hurst works as a historian at the University of Missouri in St. Louis and he was involved in several projects in that city that were aimed at reviving older dilapidated areas of the town. These projects, as well as some others, are discussed at length in the book, and the author argues that they can serve as examples of what can happen, and sometimes does happen, in other neighborhoods. He places the St. Louis experience in the context of the general increase in interest in old towns, exemplified in the US by Savannah and Charleston. However, the main argument is not that house prices can increase significantly if houses and shops in deteriorating places are restored in their old glory, but rather that knowledge of the local history can be extremely important for the current population and give a substantial impulse to neighborhood life. This point is well illustrated by the author's experiences.

The book offers many interesting examples of local history and the role it plays in discussions among the current inhabitants of the neighborhoods in which the significant events took place. For non-historians like this reviewer it is interesting to see that facts from the past are sometimes interpreted in substantially different ways by various actors and in subsequent periods, and that this is inevitable. What we preserve is necessarily a particular interpretation (or at best some mutually compatible interpretations) of cultural heritage. In an interesting chapter the author shows the parallels with the preservation of nature and also makes clear that protection of environmental amenities can often be linked

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to that of real estate that lost its original function. Throughout the book oral history and archeology are discussed alongside the more traditional sources of historical knowledge.

I close this review with a quote that summarizes the main message of the book: *'Historic preservation is too infrequently advertised as a recycling program, but that is precisely what it is.'*

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